A Linguist's View: The English Department Re-visited

By Madeline Haggan

While looking through some recent copies of Forum, I noted in the January 1997 edition yet another article setting out a case for teaching English in university English departments in the Arab world through the medium of English literature (Obeidat 1997). This seems to be the latest in a series of papers over the years by a number of specialists upholding their respective disciplines i.e., linguistics or literature as the more appropriate vehicle for graduating students with an effective command of the English language. Zughoul (1983) and Bader (1992), for example, argue for linguistics courses, while John (1986) and Obeidat (1997) favour literature. Many of these papers came out of a conference held in Jordan in 1983 (Dahiyat and Ibrahim 1983), and the debate has smoldered ever since. Although largely confined to the Arab world, it is a valid point of interest in any country where large numbers of non-native speakers graduate with degrees in English.

Before presenting my own case, I would like to pick up on some specific points made by Obeidat as I feel they are ideas with a wide distribution.

Language vs. Literature

The adversarial tone of Obeidat's paper is set by his title, "Language vs. Literature in English Departments in the Arab World," which is somewhat deceptive. When one reads further, it becomes clear that "language" in this context really means language and linguistics. Thus, Obeidat feels that there is an over-emphasis on language and linguistics input into the English curriculum, and that this emphasis is not of much use in raising the standards of the students' proficiency in English. Essentially, his thesis is that the best way to teach language is through literature. This is a very challenging view which needs careful consideration.

My first objection to Obeidat's discussion are his references throughout the paper to literature courses on the one hand, and language and linguistics courses on the other. This grouping of language teaching and linguistics teaching as one unit in opposition to literature teaching is inaccurate and misleading. Teaching linguistics is not the same as teaching language. The former involves teaching the content of an academic discipline, while the latter involves the teaching of skills. Both are important activities, but it is wrong to lump the two together.

The fact is that the teaching of linguistics may enhance and extend the students' awareness and understanding of a particular language, but it will not, per se, teach that language. The teaching of language skills is a separate operation requiring its own techniques and expertise which differ from those required in the teaching of linguistics. But the same could surely be said about teaching literature and teaching language. A certain level of proficiency in the language is required before a student can experience any presumed language-enhancing benefits from either discipline.

By grouping language and linguistics courses together as one, Obeidat is unfairly attacking the linguists in the English department for an implied weakness of the students' English. Furthermore, teaching linguistics or literature as a language skills operation is a rather weak defensive position for members of either discipline to adopt. The objective of teaching literature is surely to develop in the student the basics of aesthetic appreciation of the literature produced in a given language, while that of linguistics is to enable the student to see something of the intricate beauty of linguistic systems and the wonder of man's adeptness vis-a-vis this complexity.

As academics, we should not be defending our respective disciplines by sheltering behind the claim that we are really teaching language skills, a secondary, although nonetheless important by-product which may or may not be realised in individual students.

Literature Domination

My second criticism concerns the statistics Obeidat has presented in order to prove his allegation of the language/linguistics domination. In view of what I have just stated, his treatment of the total number of literature courses in contrast to the total number of language and linguistics courses offered in various universities is not only misleading, but actually argues against his thesis.

I refer in particular to his figures for Kuwait University which, he says, offers undergraduates in the English Department 12 courses in literature and 14 in language/linguistics, and for Sultan Qaboos University (Oman), which offers 13 literature courses and 18 language/linguistics courses. If linguistics is correctly taken as a separate academic discipline like literature, then it can be seen that if any single discipline dominates the curriculum, it is literature. He further states that 46% of the offerings in the English Department of Kuwait University and 42% of the offerings from Sultan Qaboos University are literature courses. This means that the remainder (just over half the total course offerings) are shared between language and linguistics. I feel that these figures hardly add up to the sidelining of literature courses. If one were so inclined, one could argue that any deficiencies in the students' language proficiency might be attributed to a domination by literature courses.

Even for the other universities he cites, where admittedly the figures for literature courses are smaller, the picture is muddied by his failure to provide any breakdown in the respective numbers of language skills courses and linguistics courses.

As far as the English Department at Kuwait University is concerned, the figures are outdated. In recognition of the different preferences existing among the students, we are now offering them the option, after the second year, of specialising in either linguistics or literature. Under this plan, all students take six language skills courses, and up to three remedial, non-credit courses, then five compulsory linguistics courses and five compulsory literature courses. After that, they may choose to take either nine linguistics courses or nine literature courses. The figures for Kuwait, at least, do not support his argument.

However, quite apart from this confusion of language courses with linguistics courses, there are also some very biased and unscientific statements about the relative merits of literature and language/linguistics courses as the better approach for English departments.

For example, one author writes: "Without an immediate acquaintance with words and idioms in their actual context of literature, the formal knowledge of grammar and grammatical rules alone is futile, if not worthless!" This rather sounds as if the stuff of linguistics and language textbooks is simply lists of grammatical rules. Perhaps the author should look at recent language textbooks based on the communicative approach. He or she should consider of the range of subject matter that may be studied under the rubric of linguistics. Even if we take a rather extreme case and look at the published works of Chomsky, there is certainly considerable challenging and authentic text to be found and not simply what the previous author alludes to elsewhere as "fruitless linguistic trees," itself a somewhat insulting and really rather ignorant phrase.

Literary works are not the only source wherein a student may encounter words used effectively in viable contexts. Indeed, a case could be made that many of the literary texts studied in the English curriculum provide outdated contexts and obscure expressions which fall far outside the range of any non-literary use of language. This point has been ably set out by Zughoul (1987). Obeidat refers to this study, but he does not satisfactorily address the valid points it raises. Instead, he sidesteps the whole issue by underlining the idea that literature extends the students' awareness of the expressive capacity of the language. I do not think that any reasonable person could dispute this, but it does not nullify the fact that there is also much that is unclear and eccentric.

Obeidat, however, in trying to defend the case for literature seems to carry his arguments too far. "Students," he writes, "should not be forbidden to study it (i.e., literature). For it is only from literature that the student can obtain the skills he/she needs." In the first place, I know of no English department which would ever suggest forbidding the study of English literature, and in the second place, to affirm that the study of literature alone is sufficient to ensure mastery of the language seems to me to be a very unrealistic position.

However, considerable thought must be given to what it is that the student needs in this context. Obeidat argues that a knowledge of "the semantic, syntactic, morphological and phonological rules, principles, functions, theories, and structures" is of little use to a graduate from the English department who is trying to find employment as a high-school teacher, translator, or diplomat. Although querying his particular choice of occupations, I do have some sympathy for this point. Many of our graduates here in Kuwait end up working in banks or offices where a knowledge of Chomsky is hardly an essential qualification. But then, neither is a knowledge of the diction of T. S. Eliot or Shakespeare.

Is it, indeed, the role of the English Department to provide ESP or vocational language training to qualify people for jobs in the banking industry? Surely, a university department's main objective must be to provide for intellectual development within an academic area congenial to the individual. With this in mind, let us call a truce and recognise that some of our students may prefer the literary route, and some may prefer the linguistics route, with very few of them doing doctorates in either discipline.

The issue is one that is much more basic than what appears from this rather unsavory posturing that has been taking place between linguists and literature scholars. It is that the majority of graduates from the English department are simply not as skilled or accurate in the language as employers would like or, if the truth be told, as proficient as they should be in order to deal effectively with their studies in literature or linguistics. Instead of regarding either of these two disciplines as core to language proficiency development and arguing over which one is superior, it would be more realistic to admit that without a high level of proficiency in the language to begin with, the average student could not be expected to derive much benefit from either. Chomsky himself (1965) cautioned against the direct application of the insights obtained in linguistic theory to the teaching of languages. And, as a linguistics teacher, I would honestly admit that I do not regard the teaching of practical language skills as my professional objective.

Possible Solutions

I remember Robert Penn Warren saying in a public lecture that he did not feel that it was possible for a nonnative speaker to appreciate literature. In our context, this may seem an unrealistically extreme position to adopt, but I think we can take from it that it is only when a student has sufficient command of and expertise in the language that he can derive any kind of aesthetic appreciation of literary works, which is surely a fundamental aim of literature teaching. Thus, the focus of our concern should be on how to upgrade the language skills of our students before they embark on these specialised courses. In most cases, the hoped-for language improvement does not take place simply from the student's exposure to either linguistics or literature classes, and it is a sad fact that all too many students graduate with a knowledge of transformational grammar and Shakespeare's plays but without having attained the ability to produce well-constructed, error-free sentences in English.

Part of the problem is that many students end up taking fairly advanced courses in literature and linguistics somewhat against their will and not really liking either.

Study Results

I recently administered a detailed open-ended questionnaire to 71 students in the two final years of the English Department of Kuwait University. I asked them a number of questions about their feelings and attitudes vis-a-vis what they were studying. Students filled in their responses anonymously and were encouraged to be as frank and extensive in their replies as they wished. The result makes for very interesting reading.

One of the most enlightening things to emerge was that students overwhelmingly gave the wish to perfect their language or their love of the English language as their aim in joining the English department. Closely following this was the idea that studying English would get them a good job. Neither the love of literature nor linguistics figured significantly in their responses. In fact, it was not uncommon to encounter students with a very vehement dislike of either discipline. There may be common sense grounds for believing that the force-feeding of literature and linguistics courses on to an unwilling student population may be counter-productive in terms of their language enhancement.

Reassessing Roles

It is time for English departments to reassess their roles. The very fact that there is this ongoing debate indicates that all is not well. On the one side are the demands and wishes of both students and society that the English graduate have a good command of English, which does not happen in many cases. On the other side are the valid aspirations of the academics who are concerned with conveying the content and perceptions of their respective disciplines.

At least four viable options are worth considering:

1. Let literature and linguistics be the chosen specialisations of those students who show a genuine interest in and aptitude for these subjects and a sufficient command of the language. This would rule out the misconception that these subjects are being taught "merely'' as the means to raise the language performance of students who can barely struggle through even the most basic of English texts. Such an approach would drastically cut down on the numbers of under graduates entering these disciplines, but would certainly make for a more satisfying professional experience for the academic teacher.

2. If current student numbers are to be maintained along with the existing literature/linguistics emphasis, a much greater stringency has to be applied in language proficiency teaching and testing before allowing students to embark on these specialised courses. This may mean that some of the academic courses may have to be sacrificed for more language skills courses or that students may have to spend more time taking non-credit language skills courses. Whichever method is chosen, students should be required to demonstrate a serviceable standard of English in a rigorous test of language proficiency.

3. If we listen to the voice of both students and future employers then the literature/linguistics emphasis may not be appropriate. Students taking part in my questionnaire stated categorically that the aim in joining the department was to improve their English and not to become linguistics or literature specialists. This seems to me to be a viable position. However, the problem is to ensure the continued status of English departments as centers of academic scholarship and to avoid their developing into some kind of vocational training institutes. One way to deal with this might be to retain some basic literature and linguistics courses and to expand the content orientation. There are many well-written and intellectually challenging works in English beyond the range of linguistics or literature that might be more mentally appealing to the students than what they are currently required to read. Where there is interest, the language will follow.

4. Allow for a greater infusion of translation training into the degree programme. Training in translation offers the chance of combining the literary, the linguistic, and the practical. It would satisfy some of society's needs in relation to English graduates. It would also require similar language prerequisites as outlined in (3) above.

Conclusion

The discussion of these suggestions and others that may be put forward in this vein would provide a focus for debate in this context. English departments should recognise that societies and individuals have various needs and offer choices which cater to these differing predilections and requirements.

We need not focus on whether linguistics or literature lead to better proficiency as there is room for both. We only need remember that our common aim is to provide a good, intellectually challenging language education for our students and recognise that what suits one individual may not suit another.

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